

2014 Year-Round Football Practice Contact Recommendations

Purpose:

The *Safety in College Football Summit* resulted in inter-association consensus guidelines for three paramount safety issues in collegiate athletics:

1. Independent medical care in the collegiate setting;
2. Concussion diagnosis and management; and
3. Football practice contact.

This document addresses year-round football practice contact.

Background:

Enhancing a culture of safety in collegiate sport is foundational. Football is an aggressive, rugged, contact sport,¹ yet the rules clearly state that there is no place for maneuvers deliberately designed to inflict injury on another player.¹ Historically, rules changes and behavior modification have reduced catastrophic injury and death. Enforcement of these rules is critical for improving player safety.² Despite sound data on reducing catastrophic football injuries, there are limited data that provide a strong foothold for decreasing injury risk by reducing contact in football practice.³⁻⁸ Regardless of such scientific shortcomings, there is a growing consensus that we must analyze existing data in a consensus-based manner to develop guidelines that promote safety. “Safe” football means “good” football.

NCAA regulations currently do not address inseason, full-contact practices. The Ivy League and Pac-12 Conference have limited inseason, full-contact practices to two per week and have established policies for full-contact practices in spring and preseason practices through their Football Practice Standards and Football Practice Policy, respectively. Neither address full-pad practice that does not involve live contact practice, as defined below. Both conferences cite safety concerns as the primary rationale for reducing full-contact practices; neither conference has published or announced data analysis based on their new policies. In keeping with the intent of both conferences and other football organizations, the rationale for defining and reducing live contact practice is to improve safety, including possibly decreasing student-athlete exposure for concussion and sub-concussive impacts. Reduced frequency of live contact practice may also allow even more time for teaching of proper tackling technique.

The biomechanical threshold (acceleration/deceleration/rotation) at which sport-related concussion occurs is unknown. Likewise, there are no conclusive data for understanding the short- or long-term clinical impact of sub-concussive impacts. However, there are emerging data that football players are more frequently diagnosed with sport-related concussion on days with increased frequency and higher magnitude of head impact (greater than 100g linear acceleration).⁹⁻¹¹

Traditionally, the literature addressing differing levels of contact in football practice correlated with the protective equipment (uniform) worn. This means that full-pad practice correlated with full-contact and both half-pad (shell) and helmet-only practice correlated with less

contact. However, coaches, administrators and athletics health care providers who helped to shape these guidelines have noted that contact during football practice is not determined primarily by the uniform, but rather by whether the intent of practice is centered on live contact versus teaching and conditioning. There are limited data that address this issue, and such data do not differentiate whether the intent of the practice is live tackling or teaching/conditioning. Within these limitations, non-published data from a single institution reveal the following:¹⁰

- The total number of non-concussive head impacts sustained in helmets-only and full-pad practices is higher than those sustained in games/scrimmages.
- Mild- and moderate-intensity head impacts occur at an essentially equal rate during full-pad and half-pad practices when the intent of practice is not noted.
- Severe-intensity head impacts are much more likely to occur during a game, followed by full-pad practices and half-pad practices.
- There is a 14-fold increase in concussive impacts in full-pad practices when compared to half-pad or helmets-only practices.
- Offensive linemen and defensive linemen experience more head impacts during both full-pad and half-pad practices relative to all other positions.

The guidelines below are based on: expert consensus from the two day summit referenced above; comments and recommendations from a broad constituency of the organizations listed; and internal NCAA staff members. Importantly, the emphasis is on limiting contact, regardless of whether the student-athlete is in full-pad, half-pad, or is participating in a helmet-only practice. Equally importantly, the principles of sound and safe conditioning are an essential aspect of all practice and competition exposures.

These guidelines must be differentiated from legislation. For each section below that addresses a particular part of the football calendar, any legislation for that calendar period is referenced. As these guidelines are based on consensus and limited science, they are best viewed as a “living, breathing” document that will be updated, as we have with other health and safety guidelines, based on emerging science or sound observations that result from application of these guidelines. The intent is to reduce injury risk, but we must also be attentive to unintended consequences of shifting a practice paradigm based on consensus. For example, football preseason must prepare the student-athlete for the rigors of an aggressive, contact, rugged sport. Without adequate preparation, which includes live tackling, the student-athlete could be at risk of unforeseen injury during the inseason because of inadequate preparation. We plan to reanalyze these football practice contact guidelines at least annually. Additionally, we recognize that NCAA input for these guidelines came primarily from Division I Football Bowl Subdivision schools. Although we believe the guidelines can also be utilized for football programs in all NCAA divisions, we will be more inclusive in the development of future football contact practice guidelines.

Definitions:

Live contact practice: Any practice that involves live tackling to the ground and/or full-speed blocking. Live contact practice may occur in full-pad or half-pad (also known as “shell,” in which the player wears shoulder pads and shorts, with or without thigh pads). Live contact does not include: (1) “thud” sessions, or (2) drills that involve “wrapping up;” in these scenarios players are not taken to the ground and contact is not aggressive in nature. Live contact practices are to be conducted in a manner consistent with existing rules that prohibit targeting to the head or neck area with the helmet, forearm, elbow, or shoulder, or the initiation of contact with the helmet.

Full-pad practice: Full-pad practice may or may not involve live contact. Full-pad practices that do not involve live contact are intended to provide preparation for a game that is played in a full uniform, with an emphasis on technique and conditioning versus impact.

Legislation versus guidelines:

There exists relevant NCAA legislation for the following:

1. Preseason practice
 - a. DI FBS/FCS – NCAA Bylaws 17.9.2.3 and 17.9.2.4
 - b. DII – NCAA Bylaws 17.9.2.2 and 17.9.2.3
 - c. DIII – NCAA Bylaws 17.9.2.2 and 17.9.2.3
2. In-season practice: No current NCAA legislation addresses contact during inseason practices.
3. Postseason practice: No current NCAA legislation addresses contact during postseason practices.
4. Bowl practice: No current NCAA legislation addresses contact during bowl practice.
5. Spring practice:
 - a. DI FBS/FCS – NCAA Bylaw 17.9.6.4
 - b. DII – NCAA Bylaw 17.9.8
 - c. DIII – NCAA Bylaw 17.9.6 – not referenced to as spring practice, but allows five (5) week period outside playing season.

The guidelines that follow do not represent legislation or rules. As noted in the appendix, the intent of providing consensus guidelines in year one of the inaugural *Safety in College Football Summit* is to provide consensus-based guidance that will be evaluated “real-time” as a “living and breathing” document that will become solidified over time through evidence-based observations and experience.

Preseason practice guidelines:

For days in which institutions schedule a two-a-day practice, live contact practices are only allowed in one practice. A maximum four (4) live contact practices may occur in a given week, and a maximum of 12 total may occur in preseason. Only three practices (scrimmages) would allow for live contact in greater than 50 percent of the practice schedule.

Inseason practice guidelines:

Inseason is defined as the period between six (6) days prior to the first regular-season game and the final regular-season game or conference championship game (for participating institutions). There may be no more than two (2) live contact practices per week.

Postseason guidelines: (FCS/DII/DIII)

There may be no more than two (2) live contact practices per week.

Bowl practice guidelines: (FBS)

There may be no more than two (2) live contact practices per week.

Spring practice guidelines:

Of the 15 allowable sessions that may occur during the spring practice season, eight (8) practices may involve live contact; three (3) of these live contact practices may include greater than 50 percent live contact (scrimmages). Live contact practices are limited to two (2) in a given week and may not occur on consecutive days.

References:

1. NCAA Football: 2013 and 2014 Rules and Interpretations.
2. Cantu RC, Mueller FO. Brain injury-related fatalities in American football, 1945-1999. *Neurosurgery* 2003; 52:846-852.
3. McAllister TW et al. Effect of head impacts on diffusivity measures in a cohort of collegiate contact sport athletes. *Neurology* 2014; 82:1-7.
4. Bailes JE et al. Role of subconcussion in repetitive mild traumatic brain injury. *J Neurosurg* 2013: 1-11.
5. McAllister TW et al. Cognitive effects of one season of head impacts in a cohort of collegiate contact sport athletes. *Neurology* 2012; 78:1777-1784.
6. Beckwith JG et al. Head impact exposure sustained by football players on days of diagnosed concussion. *Med Sci Sports Exerc* 2013; 45:737-746.
7. Talavage TM et al. Functionally-detected cognitive impairment in high school football players without clinically-diagnosed concussion. *J Neurotrauma* 2014; 31:327-338
8. Miller JR et al. Comparison of preseason, midseason, and postseason neurocognitive scores in uninjured collegiate football players. *Am J Sports Med* 2007; 35:1284-1288.
9. Mihalik JP, Bell DR, Marshall SW, Guskiewicz KM. Measurement of head impacts in collegiate football players: an investigation of positional and event-type differences. *Neurosurgery* 2007; 61:1229-1235.
10. Trulock S, Oliaro S. Practice contact. *Safety in College Football Summit*. Presented January 22, 2014, Atlanta, GA.

11. Crison JJ et al. Frequency and location of head impact exposures in individual collegiate football players. *J Athl Train* 2010; 45:549-559.

Endorsing Organizations:

- American Academy of Neurology
- American College of Sports Medicine
- American Association of Neurological Surgeons
- American Football Coaches Association
- American Medical Society for Sports Medicine
- American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine
- American Osteopathic Academy for Sports Medicine
- College Athletic Trainers' Society
- Congress of Neurological Surgeons
- Football Championship Subdivision Executive Committee
- National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics
- National Athletic Trainers' Association
- National Football Foundation
- NCAA Concussion Task Force
- Sports Neuropsychological Society